

Yeti Country

By C. R. COOKE

INTRODUCTION

I have been encouraged by Dr Tschernezky, who is known for his intensive studies of available data into the nature of the Yeti, to contribute this paper as Part 2 of a joint article on the Yeti. The paper consists of notes on circumstances in which I have come across strange tracks and the typical environment in which this animal may still exist. The subject of the Yeti is discussed in innumerable books and publications in many languages and some of these extend the range of such creatures over much of mountainous Southern, Central and Eastern Asia, but these notes are confined to the Himalayas in general and to Sikkim in particular where I have climbed and travelled on many occasions during 24 years' service in India.

HISTORICAL OUTLINE

Strange isolated tracks — suggestive of human footprints — have, since before the turn of the century, been reported on many occasions by travellers and mountaineers visiting the remoter parts of the Himalayas. In ancient records and from earliest times down to the present day belief in at least one variety of wild hairy man has persisted all over the Himalayas from the Karakoram in the west through Ladakh, Tibet and Nepal to Sikkim, Bhutan and Upper Burma in the east. In support of this there are many tales of a large ape-like man being seen and described by local inhabitants and herdsmen of these parts of Asia and also on rare occasions by Europeans.

Local accounts are so often embroidered with superstitious detail engendered by fear that they tend to be discounted and passed off as myth and, until 1921, attracted little scientific attention. In that year however, world-wide interest was aroused by a report from the first Mount Everest Reconnaissance Expedition to the effect that at 21,000 ft. near the Lakhpa La a series of large apparently bipedal tracks was found in the snow. These the Tibetan porters declared to be left by the "meteh Kangmi" which someone, in a cheerful translation, dubbed "The Abominable Snowman." The name delighted the Press and quickly became universal in nearly all the European languages. The local Lepcha name in Sikkim is Sokpa and in Nepal and parts of Tibet the Yeti.

The Sherpa word "Yeti" or "Yeh-teh" is a Tibetan term meaning a man-like animal which lives in rocky territory, but in Nepal and Tibet there are considered to be two types: the larger "Dzu-teh" or "yak-eating" species and the smaller "Mi-teh" or man-like species. There is in Tibet some confusion between the Dzu-teh and the Himalayan red bear (*Ursus arctos isabellinus*) of similar size and colouring, because red bear have been known to attack yaks whereas there appears to be no evidence to suggest that yaks are set upon by any kind of primate. It is possible, that there is or was a large variety of Yeti, heavy enough to be confused with the red bear, in addition to the more usually reported man-like, in other words man-sized, species. Of the many names by which similar creatures are referred to in different parts of Asia, whether or not there is more than one variety, the general name applicable to the Himalayas now accepted in English is "Yeti." There is little doubt that in past generations Yeti were much more numerous and widespread, and it seems likely that a few still survive in remote regions where they are occasionally seen or heard.

After 1921 mountaineering expeditions were on the look-out for further signs and, up to the Second World War, many sightings of likely tracks were reported and in a number of cases the animal itself was evidently seen but somehow never photographed. Doubtless in some instances tracks and animals seen at a distance were in fact bear or other known animals, but one must also suppose that on occasion the reverse applies and signs thought to be of bear *etc.* were actually those of Yeti.

In May 1940, my wife and I would, but for the keen observation of our Sikkimese coolies, almost certainly have passed over unnoticed a set of Yeti prints crossing our path high on the side of the Singalila Ridge (Figures 1 and 2). This find is discussed in the next section. After the war, with the resumption of mountaineering came the first incontrovertible evidence of the existence of the Yeti in the tracks photographed by Shipton and Ward in 1951.¹ Latterly, in spite of increasing numbers of expeditions from all over the world penetrating further into the Himalayas, when one would have expected ample supporting evidence and further photographs, positive signs of Yeti seem to have become increasingly scarce. This leads one to the sad conclusion that our evasive creature, at least in the central Himalaya, is nearing extinction. Frustrating moreover because, at the present juncture when much is being written and different accounts are being constructively collated so that the coherent picture of a real animal is beginning to emerge and the whole subject is even becoming a "respect-

¹ See Figures 1, 2 and 3 in previous article by W. Tschernetzky.

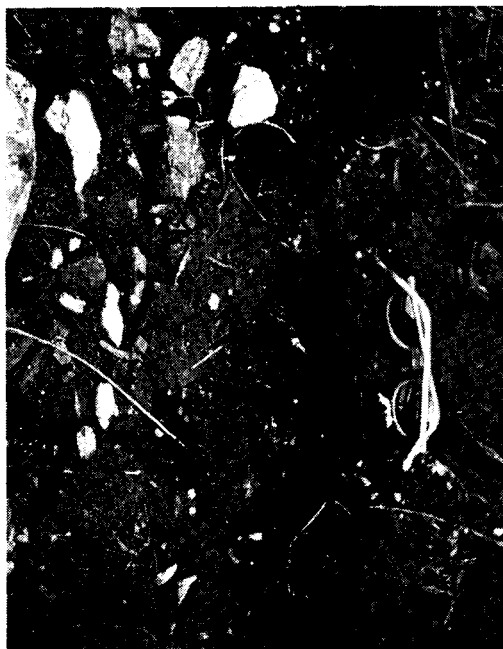


Figure 1: Snowman footprint on ground photographed from left side
(C. R. Cooke)



Figure 2: Snowman footprint photographed from behind.

able" topic for serious discussion, it now seems that he may disappear and leave but a phantom of unresolved mystery.

FOOTPRINTS FOUND IN 1940

In May 1940, my wife and I, in company with Sirdar Ang Tharkay, two other sherpas and about eight coolies, were returning separately from a brief mountaineering trip up the Prek Chu Valley with Lord (then Major) Hunt and Lady Hunt. We had just come over the Garakhet La (14,040 ft.) to the Nepal side of the Sikkim border in the late afternoon and were proceeding southwards along the rough path that follows the 13,500 ft. contour on the west side of the Singalila Ridge, when our coolies who were a few hundred yards ahead stopped, gathered round a spot on the path and presently moved on. Two sherpas were still examining the ground when we caught up with them and, on enquiry, we were shown a series of very large pug marks on the stony soil stepping from thick bushes below on the right across and uphill to our left, and there in the middle of the path was a large unmistakably man-like footprint. A second print between the bushes on the left was followed by others proceeding diagonally up the stony scrub-covered hillside. The prints were perhaps three or four days old, but were unaltered except for slight disfiguration left by the coolies with sticks who had walked across the one in the middle of the path. The sherpas, one of whom was the world-renowned Sirdar Ang Tharkay, my life-long trusted friend on whose sincerity we could rely absolutely, said they were footmarks of the "jungli admi" (Urdu for "wild man") and showed us where the tracks continued up the hillside. The matter arose spontaneously as there had been no previous talk of "Yeti" or "wild men."

I have been shown fairly fresh apparently bipedal tracks in soft snow on at least two other occasions — 26th October 1935 at 15,600 ft. on the East Rathong Glacier, and 27th October 1937 at 16,100 ft. near Green Lake on the Zemu Glacier, but in both cases dismissed them as useless for identification and gave them no further thought. My 1937 diary entry reads: "marks of . . . a snow leopard? (Porters say it is the Yetti or Sokpa or snow-man)." I was not at that time aware that snow leopard do not occur in that part of Sikkim. These latest tracks however were something very distinct and most impressive — even more so than would appear from the photographs — they were so big. I had already had some years' experience of big-game shooting in India including bear and tiger (a sport later dropped in favour of climbing) and therefore knew something about reading and following animal tracks. There was no mistaking these. They were



Figure 3: The Singalia Ridge.

bipedal tracks of a very large, heavy hominid creature, too big and broad to be those of modern man, which had come up from lower down in Nepal, crossed the path and pushed its way through the undergrowth on a diagonal route roughly in the direction from which we had come and towards the main ridge 800 ft. above.

The two clearest prints were selected and photographed — Figures 1 and 2 — with my wife's sunglasses laid alongside to fix the scale. Unfortunately, although several more prints and further traces could be seen continuing further uphill, there were no others clear enough to photograph, and time did not permit of further search. Figure 1 is of the right foot and Figure 2 was the next in sequence and made by the left foot, but of this I cannot now be absolutely sure.

Tschernezy has expressed the opinion that Figure 9 shows another print of the animal's right foot and there might have been an intermediate step not photographed. It was difficult to take the second picture because the impression lay half obscured under bushes which had to be held aside while a picture was taken from a low angle. In both cases, owing to cloudy conditions and fading light, it was necessary to use a wide aperture which made it impossible with a slow film (Kodak Panatomic X) to stoop down and take closer vertical shots without risk of the result being badly out of focus. My camera was a 35 mm. Kodak Retina I. The correct outline could be restored by projection from an angle, using the sunglasses as a guide to size and shape.

Figure 3 shows the Singalila Ridge photographed on the next morning a few miles further down and looking back at the same path which can be seen below the cloud layer winding along in the left centre of the picture. Sikkim lies over the ridge to the right.

There is no human habitation near this area. The nearest would be at Ramthang over on the Sikkim side of the ridge some miles and 7,000 ft. down the Rumbu Chu through impenetrable forest and anyhow the tracks were headed towards uninhabited country to the north-east, making perhaps for a small lake which lies on the Sikkim side of the main divide.

The photographs were never published, partly because the war intervened and partly because later I was not satisfied that by themselves they were clear enough to warrant it and fully expected that, with the resumption of mountaineering, more conclusive evidence would soon come to light.

To my mind, however, there was never any doubt that these footprints were extremely significant and later, on seeing Shipton's famous photographs which compare closely in general shape and size and, taking the two records together from the same Kangchen-

junga/Everest area, we have proof of the existence of a rare primate. Furthermore, I incline to the view that this could be a survivor, now restricted to the bigger glaciated valleys of the Himalayas, still existing in conditions not unlike those which must have extended over much of Europe and Asia at the retreat of the last Ice Age.

That Yeti traces of any kind are exceedingly rare is shown by the following. The area of Sikkim south and east of Kangchenjunga, was fairly frequently visited between the wars by parties of climbers and trekkers but, over a span of about 15 years I have this meagre list of reports:

1. 1924?—30 miles south of Kangchenjunga, at about 10,000 ft., one believed seen by H. Newman near Chiabanjan; too far away for study.

2. 1925—8-10 miles south-east, at 15/16,000 ft. in Talung Valley region, one seen near rhododendrons by N. A. Tombazi; brief sighting. Footprints also examined.

3. 1935—10 miles south, at 15,600 ft., track in snow shown to Cooke and G. Schoberth; doubtful Yeti.

4. 1937—12 miles east-north-east, at 16,000 ft., confused track in snow shown to Lord Hunt and C. R. Cooke; doubtful Yeti.

5. 1937—5 miles east, at 18/19,000 ft., pair of tracks followed to Zemu Gap by Lord Hunt; probably Yeti.²

6. 1938—5 to 6 miles east, at 18,000 ft. (?), a pair of tracks near Zemu Gap followed by two Norwegian climbers (I have not read their account).

7. Year?—6 to 8 miles south-east, at 15/16,000 ft. (?), pair of tracks reported seen on Tongshyong Glacier; account not read.

8. 1940—20 miles south, at 13,500 ft., single track photographed on hillside by Cooke. See Figures 1 and 2.

After the war this area was closed following the occupation of Tibet by the Chinese.

THE SIKKIM ENVIRONMENT

Setting aside plain scepticism, it is constructive to consider reasons for the extreme scarcity and sporadic nature of the evidence supporting the existence of the Yeti as a descendant of a pre-hominid group of animals, man-like in build and still unknown to science.

Looking back over the recent history of man's presence in the Himalayas it is not surprising that a large, rare, very active and

² Odette Tchernine, *Explorers' and Travellers' Tales*, Heron Books Ltd., 18 St Ann's Crescent, London, SW18.

hardy, but shy and wary creature, which by its very nature must need an extensive area of special conditions in which to roam should have retreated from the encroachments of modern man and become even more scarce. There are many parallels in nature. Even primitive peoples who do not cultivate but are habituated to a roaming existence become reduced in numbers by the mere proximity of other races from outside. We have an example in Sikkim itself where, in spite of recent attempts to reserve for them some less accessible parts of the country, the Lepchas of Sikkim are dying out with the gradual influx of the new Sikkimese — Nepalis, Bhotias and other neighbouring tribes. These shy, peaceable and primitive Lepchas are remarkable in their understanding of the plants and birds of their forests and, unlike the new Sikkimese, distinguish many varieties in nature with their own specific names. Their shyness was illustrated on one occasion when I approached a little habitation consisting of two families, and my porters advised me to stay out of sight while they went ahead to explain that a white man would be passing by, otherwise the Lepchas would bolt into the forest and I would never see them. As it was, I met only one family — a man, his wife and their one child, a boy aged 12 or 14.

That conditions are in fact "special" in the great glaciated valleys of Sikkim, Nepal and Bhutan is self-evident, for here they are of immense size, extending over the greatest differences in height in the world, with a high annual rainfall, strong semi-tropical sun due to the latitude, a mild winter even near the snow line and an endless variety of food due to dense, luxuriant vegetation ranging from tropical to alpine. The vegetation grades from bamboos, leech-infested undergrowth, great forest trees and creepers — alive with birds and insects — and heavy with lianas, ferns, orchids and mosses, rising through conifers, rhododendrons, grasses, rocky alpine and lichens to moraine and glacier above. More than 600 bird species have been listed in this area which covers less than 2500 sq. miles much of which is bare snow and moraine. Below the moraines and rocky uplands, the valley sides, apart from being densely wooded, are so steep that direct travel up them is virtually impossible. It is little wonder therefore that Yeti prints are found only where he has broken cover or moved up over the snow into a new area.

An actual account of the difficult nature of the country may not be out of place. In November 1937, with three fit sherpas, I crossed from the Zemu Glacier over a high pass between Simvu and Siniolchu down on to the Umaram Glacier (in those days unmapped and thought to be the Passanram Glacier) and forced a route down to the Talung, the great valley which extends for 45 miles from the eastern slopes of Kangchenjunga down to the

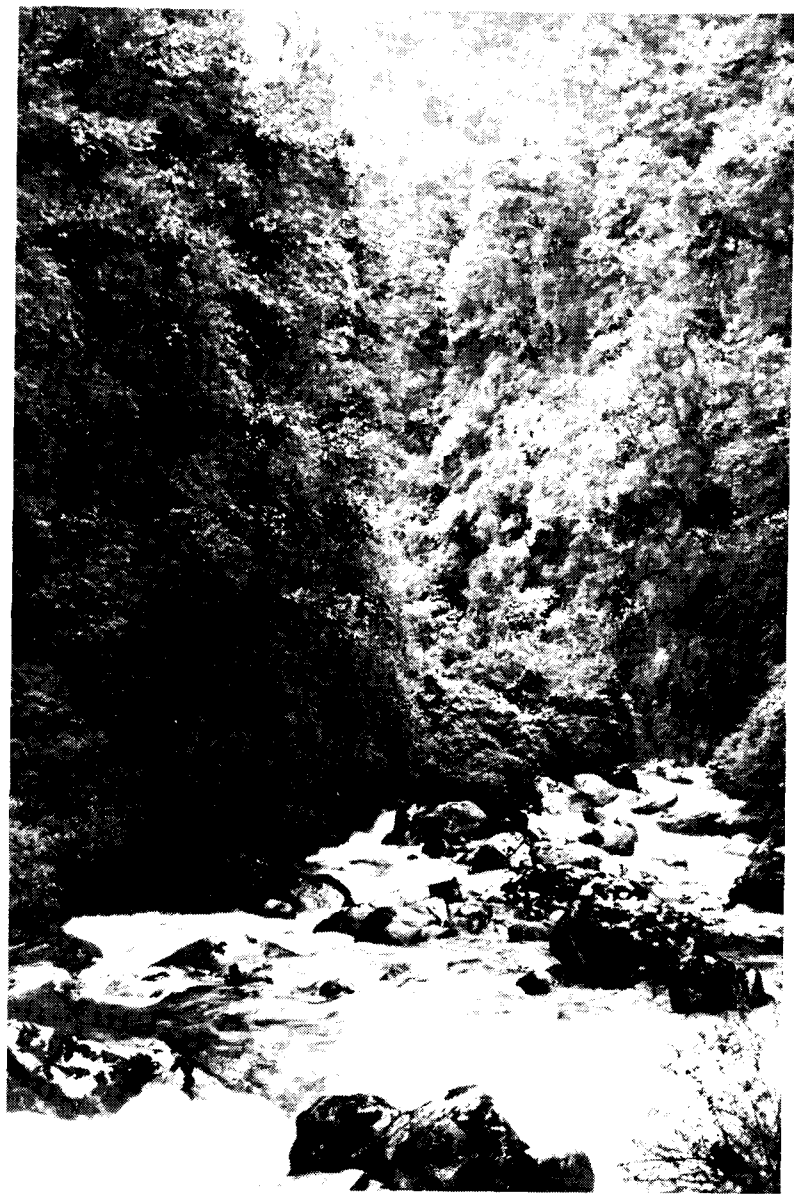


Figure 4: Typical Sikkim wooded ravine.

Teesta River in the middle of Sikkim. Within a mile of the end of the moraine, the Umaram stream entered a narrow gorge and we were forced left up the steep valley side where a route had to be cut through dense vegetation at a steep angle and blocked at intervals by steep gullies, rushing water and landslides. We had started with 12 days' food but after a week we were still floundering in thick forest a mere four or five miles from where we left the moraine.

The river we saw only once more and here I quote from my diary:

We were struggling along making desperately slow progress, about $\frac{1}{4}$ mile per hour, when we came to the bed of a stream which cuts its way through solid rock down a sort of immense gutter at a steep angle and then sheer down a sort of tunnel in the living rock 200 feet, at the bottom of which we could just discern the main stream boiling along in the darkness like a giant sewer — I have never seen such a gorge in my life, the two sides of the valley cannot be separated by more than 10 to 20 feet although 200 feet deep, perhaps the gorge is completely bridged over — we could not make out through the dense undergrowth. The route, which had been along a spur of densely forested rock towers, seemed about as difficult as it was possible for it to be . . . we then made up the side of the mountain for 100 feet and then dived into the worst jungle of the trip — a complete tangle of small stuff and thorns and briars 12 ft. high growing amongst a series of rock faces and boggy streams rushing down. We did about $\frac{1}{4}$ mile in $1\frac{1}{2}$ hours and all got thoroughly exhausted. . . .

We owed our lives to Kikuli Sherpa whose eye for a jungle trail spotted that the tip of a fern frond had been sliced off by someone and impressed it upon me that there would be a track somewhere which had to be found if we were to come through. Two hours of anxious searching revealed vestiges of a trail which with great care for two days we managed to follow. It led us a most tortuous route which we nearly abandoned but fortunately kept to, for it avoided many unsuspected obstacles. In one instance we were led to the top of a sheer rock face against which a series of very large single bamboo poles had been affixed one below another 100 feet down, with notches for footholds. These took us safely past an obstacle which, on looking back, one could see would have been exceedingly dangerous at any other point, and then on past further difficulties which need not be detailed here.

Figure 4 illustrates a typical Sikkim wooded ravine, looking up-stream at the Parek Chu river at an altitude of about 7500 ft.

By an act of providence we had found a Lepcha trail, but for which I believe we should not have escaped, because a year or so earlier, a much stronger German party — the first to cross this pass — was less fortunate and by all accounts suffered considerable privation from exhaustion and shortage of food.

So, one can appreciate why it is not easy to stalk and come upon any wild animals let alone a creature such as we visualise in the Yeti. For food the Lepchas set snares or traps in the form of sharpened bamboo spikes. Once, sliding 30 feet down a smooth rock face on my bottom, I was very nearly impaled on a row of such spikes in the forest cunningly placed on a foot from and pointing up the slope, but I spotted them and reacted quickly enough to leap clear over them.

SOME DEDUCTIONS

Nearly all accounts of Yeti tracks or sightings agree in one aspect, namely that the animal, except in cases where it was unaware of human presence, was taking avoiding action and moving away from disturbance — climbing up over snow into another valley or retreating out of view *etc.* — *i.e.* avoiding the most dangerous of all animals, man. There is no report of any substance in which a Yeti unprovoked has attacked a man, rather one gathers that he is easily scared away by the monastic horn or any commotion. It may also be that he is nocturnal or crepuscular in habit. Tchernine says that the great Linnaeus knew of him or a similar creature and provided a niche for him in his classification of species with the name *Homo nocturnus*. In spite of his popular title, few really suppose that the Yeti lives above the snow line. Ecologically this would hardly be possible. The fact is that the only areas where his tracks are easily seen are on fresh snow which on occasion he crosses. He has not been seen chasing game, nor are there accornts of his having shed blood on the snow, whereas he has been observed rooting about amongst rhododendrons (N. A. Tombazi). H. Newman reported seeing what he believed to be a Yeti foraging on the edge of a wood in a high valley in West Sikkim. According to Izzard and Stonor there is indication that Yeti eat small animals, such as mouse hares common in rocky terrain. One Sherpa porter related to me an occasion when as a boy he was with his father, a yak-herd, when one night a Yeti scared their young yak calf which was tethered outside their hut and the intruder had to be frightened off.

Descriptions all agree that he has long hair over most of his body, colour varying from brown to grey or tawny, a pointed

head, deep set eyes, no tail, a human-like countenance, that he walks bipedally and is about the size of a man.

Isolated descriptions refer in some cases to long, pendant breasts in the female; in other rare cases great size is claimed, perhaps seven feet or more. He is not reported below about 12,000 ft. The Yeti presumably is omnivorous, supplementing a vegetarian diet with small animals, fish or anything that he can catch and lives near but below the permanent snow-line.

There is only one animal he could reasonably be confused with and that is the Himalayan so-called red bear (*isabellinus*) — which Tschernezky tells me can vary widely in colouring from reddish brown to fawn or nearly white, but there is no chance of either Shipton's photographs or mine resembling bear tracks. In any case the red bear occurs in the Western Himalaya but not in Sikkim. The much smaller Himalayan Black Bear with the white markings on his chest (I once kept a cub nearly full grown) does occur and can be a nuisance to villagers living in the higher valleys and doubtless at a distance has been mistaken for a Yeti, but he does not venture on to the snow, nor is he bipedal — he can totter upright for a few paces. Generally speaking there is not much chance of confusion, for large animals are not numerous in Sikkim above 6,000 to 8,000 ft. Percy Brown in his book entitled *Tours in Sikkim* under the heading of "Big Game" says: "In the true sense of the word there is no big game in Sikkim" and, except near the Tibet frontier, the only large animals likely to be seen are the Burhel (*Ovis Nahir*) and the wild goat (*Nemorhaedus Goral*). Tahr are rare and sambhur, barking deer, pig and leopard occur at lower altitudes. The snow leopard does not seem to be recorded in Sikkim.

Without over-exercising the imagination, the Yeti has points of resemblance with the gorilla. He does not, like the chimpanzee, move about in troops but usually singly or in pairs. He is too heavy to be arboreal, is probably as already suggested omnivorous, frequently walks erect and is wary and unaggressive. He seems to have a whistling or high-pitched call and a deep "roar" if roused. His feet are somewhat like but even broader than the gorilla and, in some specimens — perhaps the older males — seems to be very large and greyer in colouring. Local opinion is universal in regarding him as more man-like than ape-like though he seems not able to speak. So far no one has found a cave with evidence of Yeti occupation, but caves in Sikkim are not common and such "caves" as exist are no more than rocky overhangs affording shelter from the rain. Such are used by the Lepchas. Presumably therefore, like the gorilla, the Yeti nests on the ground in wooded country where a dry spot is not hard to find, or perhaps amongst the densely tangled rhododendron scrub so

common on the hillsides. It took Schoberth and me two whole days of hacking with the assistance of our men to cut a way through tall rhododendrons (we camped in the middle of them) to reach grass near the snout of the Rathong Glacier.

I have heard only one report of a dead specimen being found, but in forest country dead animals are quickly scavenged and leave no trace. According to this report, which is here repeated for what it is worth with no claims as to reliability, told to me (if my memory serves) in 1929 by Tashi Dhondhup of the earlier Everest expeditions, apparently some of the party had descended to a valley in Nepal to recuperate. There the porters met a couple of yak herdsman who told them they had come up earlier in the spring of the same year to graze their yaks and found the body of a Yeti at the foot of an avalanche slope half submerged in a small mountain lake, and it seems that the information was not relayed to the other members of the expedition.

It is possible that the males attain much greater size than the females, or there may be two distinct species, one a large very rare animal perhaps over six or seven feet when standing upright, well adapted to negotiating glacier country and cold conditions on the high passes en route to new feeding areas; and another nearer five feet in stature about which the lamas tell their stories. There is even talk of three kinds but we have still to see photographs or the bones of a single variety.

THE FUTURE

Vast though the Himalayan complex of mountains may be, once disturbed and removed to another area, there again to be disturbed, the Yeti is likely to be deprived of sufficiently large and isolated areas in which to live. For where can he go? Not south to India or north to Tibet — he can only shift from one area to another. The modern populations have penetrated all the easier valleys and the mountaineering fraternity are fast dealing with the rest.

The explosion of climbing activity among these mountains must be invading the last of the really sizeable and plant-rich areas where a truly wild creature can hope to roam and breed. The highly organised, heavily financed and artificial exercises with groups of up to 15 or 20 mountaineers and "experts" with their retinues of coolies, porters, baggage trains, camps and commotion are a strain on even the local economy so cannot fail to have an impact on the wild life, especially a scarce, elusive creature such as a Yeti. Even by Himalayan standards the number of expeditions is not small. In 1970 alone more than 60 mountaineering expeditions from all over the world were granted

permits and between them assailed more than 140 peaks from the Karakorams to the Tibet-Bhutan border. There is no count of all the other activities: scientific investigations, military patrols, trekking, shooting and new cultivation. Even the closure of the Tibet border by the Chinese, or the political restrictions imposed by India on entry into Sikkim and Bhutan alters the situation little. The Yeti can only retreat to a few high valleys in perhaps Sikkim or the odd corner of Nepal or Bhutan or the Shan States if there are any lofty unoccupied valley systems big enough. Otherwise it is hard to see how the species can survive — at least in the Himalayas.

The whole position is unsatisfactory. Is this man-ape a reality and is he in danger of becoming extinct? These are questions which demand an answer — if only for reasons of saving a rare and unique primate.

I have long held the view that the only hope of discovering and photographing a Yeti is through the exercise of great skill and patience, aptly summarised in the words of Mira Behn: "Humility is needed in the search for this mysterious living species." I visualise a very small party of perhaps two competent and physically fit observers, living rough and "on the country" and prepared to move about and watch by day or night unobtrusively without tents, porters and the usual Western paraphernalia, who would as it were melt into the country, remain three or four years becoming accepted by the locals without interference on either side and tactfully enlisting help and advice from isolated herdsmen, forest dwellers, small Lepcha communities and the like. Rare dedication would be required, there would be political difficulties to negotiate, bona fides to be established, language and local customs to be understood and confidence and co-operation to be won from village headsmen, kazis, priests in the shape of simple friendship. The only weapon would be the camera and the party would need to train in various skills including forestry, safari and healthy survival apart from the more obvious faculties of zoology, botany and photography.

Such Yeti as still survive will owe their existence to a combination of their own handy elusive nature, the extreme ruggedness of their environment and, most important, the accident of the prevailing Buddhist religion which proscribes the taking of wild life, especially the Yeti which in effect is held sacrosanct.

The discovery of our super-ape, with some information as to his nature or anatomy, would be a matter of such profound interest to the scientific world that he could at once fall into a more precarious situation than applies already, and a miracle of international co-operation would be needed to avert eventual tragedy. It is sure that this creature has existed and, if still alive,

is now on the way out, so time matters and a search should be made but with preservation as its main object. The consequences of a wrongly inspired search for knowledge in this field need to be widely appreciated so that timely and powerful action can be taken to save this creature and a part of his world before he disappears for ever. A successful outcome has the makings of becoming the greatest triumph ever for zoology or anthropology — whichever — and for modern wild life preservation.

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